

REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP GRANT (RPG) PROGRAM: EFFECTIVE SYSTEMS LINKAGES – KEY IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION LESSONS



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RPG PROGRAM BRIEF #3

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About the RPG Program Briefs Series

This is the third in a series of program briefs discussing the initial grant period of the Regional Partnership Grant (RPG) Program, administered by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. In 2007, 53 grantees representing state, county, and tribal partnerships were awarded "Targeted Grants to Increase the Well-Being of, and to Improve the Permanency Outcomes for, Children Affected by Methamphetamine or Other Substance Abuse." The initial grant period for the RPG Program was September 2007 – September 2012.

The four program briefs cover the following:

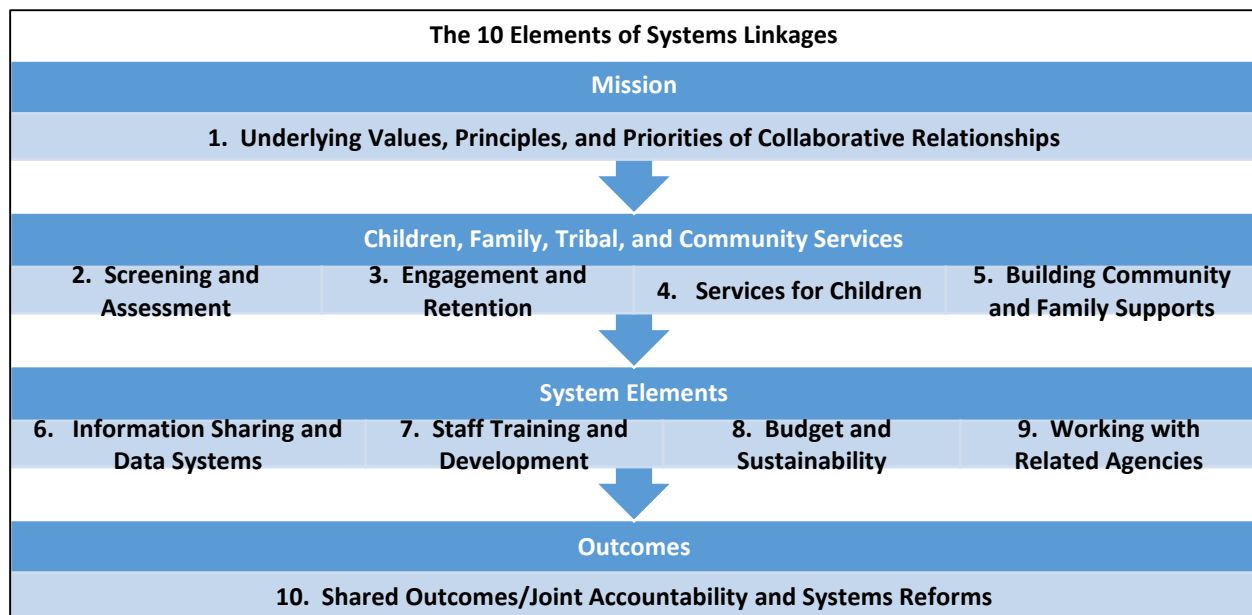
- **RPG Program Brief 1:** Legislative Intent and General Overview
- **RPG Program Brief 2:** Overview of Grantees' Services and Interventions
- **RPG Program Brief 3:** Effective Systems Linkages – Key Implementation Lessons
- **RPG Program Brief 4:** RPG Program: Interim Safety, Permanency, Well-Being, and Recovery Outcomes

Additional information about the RPG Program can be found in the Reports to Congress, available at <http://www.cffutures.org/projects/regional-partnership-grants>.

INTRODUCTION

Twice a year, the Regional Partnership Grantees (RPGs) submit a required Semi-Annual Progress Report to the Children's Bureau. These reports provide valuable information on the partnerships' major activities and accomplishments, progress towards program goals, program and evaluation challenges faced and solutions to overcome them, and contextual events or community changes that impact the collaborative partnership and services provided to families.

The Children's Bureau conducted a qualitative review of grantees' Semi-Annual Progress Reports submitted through the end of the grant period (through September 30, 2012). A 10-element collaborative framework developed by the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare was used as the organizing principle to systematically assess the regional partnerships' progress in strengthening cross-systems collaboration to serve families. This framework was useful to gauge grantees' strengths, challenges, and progress, as well as identify key lessons learned.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE RPGs COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS: 11 KEY IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION LESSONS

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) identified 11 key program implementation lessons which emphasize the complexity of cross-systems collaboration. They convey important insights about how grantees' collaborative experiences improved over the course of the grant and enhanced their ability to meet families' multiple needs.

1. Collaboration is essential to address the complex and multiple needs of families and sustain integrated service delivery.

Families who are involved in the child welfare system and affected by a parent's substance use disorder have complex and multiple needs that cannot be adequately addressed by one provider

or service system alone. The RPG Program recognized that effective service coordination and timely access to treatment and related community support services were needed to address the full spectrum of challenges these families face.

The active engagement of core partners from the child welfare, substance abuse treatment, court, and other service systems was essential to the partnership's overall success. To meet the unique needs of families and facilitate their positive outcomes, grantees said personal relationships needed to evolve into meaningful and formalized partnerships. Meaningful collaboration and full partner buy-in were critical to sustain integrated services and a full continuum of care for families.

Grantees stated the collaboration they developed and strengthened over the course of the grant was one of the most important contributing factors to their overall success. It established a foundation on which to build other current and future community projects to serve families with complex needs who are involved in multiple systems.

2. Collaboration to establish cross-systems linkages and effective sustainability planning takes time and is developmental and iterative in nature.

Collaboration can become increasingly challenging as partners move beyond the beginning stages of collaboration (sharing basic information about each other's systems, convening partnership meetings) to more advanced levels (implementing practice, policy and systems changes, sustainability planning). Agencies develop and acquire collaborative capacity through experience and by applying lessons learned. Grantees agreed five years was the minimum needed to work collaboratively with a diverse set of partners to achieving the broad scope of RPG Program goals.

Grantees found the collaborative process ebbs and flows, partnerships evolve and sometimes devolve, and relationships must be cultivated and re-cultivated with new and existing partners. The need for continued nurturing of the collaborative was particularly important given the budget cuts, staff layoffs, and leadership and administration changes that grantees endured throughout the grant period.

Key Factors that Facilitate Advanced Levels of Collaboration

Among partnerships that moved to more advanced levels of collaboration, more than two-thirds shared these common facilitating characteristics:

- Consistent and dedicated leadership who supported the project over time (85.4 percent).
- Sustainability planning that did not rely on one agency to pick up funding; rather, various partners contributed in-kind, matching, or other resources (70.8 percent).
- Collaboration that extended well beyond child welfare, substance abuse, and the courts to include other critical stakeholders that provided necessary project support and resources (68.8 percent).
- An oversight body that prioritized and addressed collaboration regularly at partnership meetings (66.7 percent).

3. Intensive multi-faceted outreach is needed at the client, partner, agency, and community levels.

Intensive multi-faceted outreach at all levels impacted multiple practice and systems areas. It improved cross-systems collaboration, client engagement and retention, program sustainability, working with other community agencies, and building supports for families. Such outreach provided continuity and coordination between systems and providers, facilitated early intervention and timely access to treatment, and helped families navigate multiple and often conflicting systems. It also built trust with families, enhanced program visibility and credibility, and helped establish the RPG program as an essential community resource.

Grantees said the same vigor that went into client and partner outreach needed to extend to the broader community and potential funders. Data and client stories were an integral and fundamental part of grantees' marketing and information dissemination efforts. Through continued and proactive outreach and marketing, grantees succeeded in translating their lessons into action. They worked to convey the RPG lessons and inform broader practice and collaborative efforts in their communities and regions.

One grantee acknowledged they had mistakenly assumed child welfare social workers were familiar with all aspects of their family-centered treatment program. As such, they did not adequately inform child welfare of the program's comprehensive benefits to parent, child, and family. The grantee said this became clear when a child protective services supervisor stated they did not refer mothers with co-occurring mental disorders to the RPG program because the grantee is a "substance abuse treatment agency." Through extensive outreach and education about the array of services provided for pregnant women and women with children (including mental health services for parents and therapeutic services for children), the grantee was able to significantly increase program referrals from child welfare.

4. The collaborative must continually assess its progress and adapt its program and services to meet families’ unmet and emerging needs and facilitate client engagement and retention.

The RPG Program authorizing legislation envisioned that families would receive a comprehensive and integrated service array to meet their needs. To fulfill this legislative intent, grantees continually assessed their overall collaborative progress (e.g., through continuous quality improvement and related activities) and refined their program models over the course of the grant. Nearly all grantees (92.5 percent) made new program changes to serve their children, adults, and families more effectively and efficiently.

Throughout the grant, program evaluation was integral to ongoing program development and improvement. Grantees conducted case reviews, agency walk-throughs, drop-off analyses, and evidence-based systems improvement processes. They used feedback from client, staff, and stakeholder satisfaction surveys, interviews, and focus groups. As one partnership stated, they became “a data-driven decision-making collaborative.” Their project team measured everything and used the data at each partner meeting to build a story of what was going on with services.

The NIATx experience has helped grantees build their region’s capacity. Each member agency has learned how to facilitate a process improvement project. This new skill benefits future collaboration, service delivery, and sustainability of the larger regional partnership and each participating organization.

As one grantee that sponsored a Change Leaders Academy for more than 40 participants from five different community partners noted, “The [RPG’s] introduction of the NIATx model to community partners has been a major contribution to helping organizations approach change in an organized and measured manner.”

5. A comprehensive family-centered approach is needed to break the intergenerational cycle of substance abuse and child maltreatment and effectively address a family’s complex, underlying issues.

Over the course of the RPG Program, grantees experienced a major paradigm shift: They moved from individual-focused services to more comprehensive family-centered treatment. The partnerships, and the families they served, came to recognize that treating the family system—rather than an individual child or parent in isolation—was far more effective in addressing a family’s underlying and complex issues.

During the initial stages of the RPG Program, grantees tended to focus first on meeting the parents’ substance abuse treatment needs. Beginning in program year two, grantees worked to develop the direct children’s services component of their programs. Grantees then moved to integrate parent and child services to provide a more family-centered continuum of care. At the end of the grant period, the partnerships had begun to broaden their scope further to engage and support other family members, particularly fathers.

An agency director at one site remarked that previously, when the clients were “just the adults,” it was often easier to set treatment goals and expect the client to complete them within a reasonable amount of time. Now that the program focuses on “family goals,” they have had to address many more issues. The director noted that while this shift has yielded better outcomes, the process is much more complex and it takes much longer to stabilize families.

Program participants stated the substance abuse treatment counselors’ approach to “inviting” people into the program and asking about the needs of their children and families increased their willingness to seek and remain in treatment. The grantee added that just asking simple questions, such as, “How is your child’s school attendance?” and “How is your family?” had a positive impact on client engagement.

6. Broadening the partnership beyond child welfare and substance abuse treatment to work with other community agencies is critical to securing important core treatment and supportive services.

New relationships must be cultivated on an ongoing basis to establish true collaboration, strengthen program and partnership effectiveness, and increase program sustainability potential. The regional partnerships continually evolved over the five year period, with the member agencies becoming more diverse as services progressed and community awareness increased. With the addition of each partner, the reach and scope of the grantees’ projects broadened. Their overall capacity strengthened as they added new ideas, expertise, and services.

The specific types of new partners beyond child welfare and substance abuse treatment that were needed, and why, varied by grantee, depending on their geographic location, target population, availability of other community resources, fiscal climate, local priorities, and other issues.

As the RPG Program progressed, the role of ancillary services in facilitating and sustaining positive outcomes only increased. Grantees noted the importance of mental health services, safe and affordable housing, and continuing recovery supports, in particular.

In one site, the lead substance abuse treatment agency officially merged with the mental health agency during the final year of the grant. The merger allows for a more seamless approach to treating families with co-occurring disorders. Prior to the formal merger, the two agencies had begun co-facilitating groups and increased joint case planning with social workers. They had also worked on a joint response for investigations involving reported substance use and co-occurring mental disorders. More recently, a psychiatric nurse practitioner joined the team to provide increased oversight and support for medication management for children and their parents.

7. Clear roles, responsibilities, and expectations are required of partners, providers, and families to promote both individual and shared accountability.

The regional partnerships dealt with complex family situations and multiple providers responsible for monitoring families' progress. As such, clear roles, responsibilities, decision-making processes, and client and partner expectations about the respective systems were essential. Without such clarity, diffusion of responsibility can lead to conflict, fragmentation, duplication of services, ineffective collaboration, and unproductive sustainability planning.

Agreement on roles and responsibilities needed to extend beyond the local level partners and include state level partners. It also extended to sustainability planning. Making sustainability a stated objective was important, but not sufficient without dedicated staff and specified roles.

Families, too, needed clarity and consistency on the various systems' roles and expectations. They needed to understand the respective role of each partner providing services to support them. Setting clear client expectations increased engagement, retention, and successful program completion. It also provided a structure of accountability and support that helped empower parents.

The most important thing I learned is that one cannot spend too much time planning ahead and setting up a clear line (chain) of communication and accountability. When entering such a partnership, there must be an agreed outcome or goal. - Regional Partnership Grantee

One grantee has an active client council that helps formulate policies related to daily client procedures and rules, as well as the program's overall cultural sensitivity and responsiveness. The major purpose of this collective body, which meets weekly, is to promote ownership and enhance accountability of client participation in the program.

8. Ongoing communication, information sharing, monitoring, and supervision are crucial at both the systems and direct service levels.

Ongoing communication, information sharing, and regular monitoring of client and partnership activities were essential to identify and respond to both direct service (e.g., client engagement and retention, continuity of care) and larger collaboration challenges (e.g., maximizing available resources, ensuring joint accountability for project goals). An infrastructure of consistent communication and regular monitoring was especially important to ensure effective integrated service delivery and program fidelity as the partnerships dealt with significant community and contextual events (e.g., budget cuts, staff turnover, fiscal, policy, and leadership changes, shifts in child welfare and substance abuse trends).

Ways in which the partnerships promoted communication included regular partnership meetings at various levels (e.g., leadership, management, front-line workers and providers), multidisciplinary case planning processes, formalized communication protocols, and a dedicated or central staff person to coordinate information among multiple partners and providers.

In recounting their most important lessons learned over the course of the grant, several grantees emphasized the essential nature of communication:

- “The most important recommendation to creating a successful cross-system collaborative learned from the [RPG] project is to have constant communication, among all the different agencies and at all staff levels.”
- “The communication systems of the project should be very well established and all members of the partnership, including the evaluators, should be well aware of all collaborative practice activities.”
- “Regular communication among project staff is key to operating programs such as these. While this seems like a common sense statement, there were definitely times in which lack of communication between staff and partner agencies resulted in confusion and friction.”

9. Ongoing staff training and development is needed to enhance collaboration, increase service coordination, and build capacity for the array of services and supports families need.

Recruitment, training, development, and retention of qualified staff were key ingredients for comprehensive collaborative programs. Staffing impacted all program aspects and was key for cross-systems data collection and performance monitoring. Sufficient time and resources to support and institutionalize staff training and development need to be essential project components in larger project implementation and sustainability plans. This was even more critical given the increased emphasis in the field to provide evidence-based practices and monitor their fidelity. The need for qualified staff extended beyond those in clinical positions. A strong and consistent project director with adequate knowledge of families’ needs and leadership and management abilities was important to advance the collaborative.

10. The partnership and program need to be integrated into other existing systems’ efforts and infrastructures and leverage all available resources to facilitate sustainability.

To institutionalize and sustain the RPG interventions, a grantee’s overall program needed to be integrated into existing efforts or infrastructures rather than operate as a stand-alone model or project. This required an understanding of how the grantee’s program and partnership aligned with other agency goals and their role in the broader community’s child welfare, substance abuse treatment, and other service systems. The lesson of integration applied not only to direct services, but also to agency-level collaboration.

Grantees integrated their efforts with other related program and policy initiatives in various ways. They integrated with their state’s child welfare system improvement processes (e.g., Child and Family Services Review or Performance Improvement Plan). They joined with larger health care reform and care coordination efforts to establish a permanent medical and behavioral health care home for their RPG families. They transitioned RPG staff positions, services, and knowledge to partnering agencies that will continue to serve families beyond the grant. In addition, grantees connected with other related grants or community initiatives to leverage

additional resources. Finally, some grantee lead agencies incorporated the RPG-specific efforts with complementary efforts within their own larger agency or organization.

Sustainability Lessons from the 53 Grantees

The experiences of all 53 grantees offered valuable insights about what it takes to institutionalize and sustain the RPG efforts. Their collective experiences point to the following common factors that helped support sustainability:

- Investment in and commitment to strong, broad-based collaboration that enabled partners to share financial and other resource needs.
- Early, proactive, and formalized sustainability planning inclusive of all major stakeholders.
- Demonstrated effectiveness in serving families and positive child, adult, and family outcomes and documented cost savings.
- The ability to develop new billing or contract structures, or modify existing ones, to support the provision and reimbursement of RPG services.
- Extensive and resourceful program marketing and information dissemination to key stakeholders, potential funders, and the larger community to demonstrate how the program changed families' lives.
- Key program and policy leadership, including support from the state legislature.
- A detailed sustainability plan with concrete action steps, and the flexibility to revise the plan in response to political, fiscal, leadership, and other contextual changes.

11. The larger economic and fiscal environment has a notable impact on collaborative service delivery and sustainability planning efforts.

Grantees reported the challenging fiscal climate that persisted throughout the grant period adversely affected their regional partnerships' services, outcomes, and collaborative capacity. They noted state and county budget cuts reduced substance abuse treatment capacity, affected child welfare staffing patterns, impacted contract service dollars, and decreased collaborative activities. In addition, the level and type of available community support services (outside of RPG-funded services) that families relied on diminished. Acknowledging these contextual impacts was important in understanding grantees' progress and challenges, and in interpreting the RPG child, parent, and family outcomes.

For one grantee, some type of significant community and contextual event emerged at least once a year, every year throughout the grant. These events ranged from political and economic disasters to natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, flood). Despite this, the RPG team remained hopeful and persevered. They worked through these challenges to achieve positive outcomes for their families.

PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND PROGRAM EVALUATION LESSONS

The capacity and capability of grantees to combine comprehensive, integrated service delivery with rigorous performance monitoring and local project evaluation varied across sites. Though the learning curve was steep, the partnerships made substantial progress over the course of the grant. Grantees' collective experiences in monitoring and assessing progress across agencies provide important lessons for future initiatives.

The eight key lessons below emphasize the inherent complexity of examining child, adult, and family outcomes across multiple service systems. These lessons parallel the above collaborative program implementation lessons.

- **Collaboration, broad-based partner support, and shared values are prerequisites for establishing cross-systems information sharing.** Collaborative partnerships create an essential infrastructure to support and maintain cross-systems data and information sharing. Only through cooperative working relationships can the regional partnerships effectively track families' involvement across systems and monitor the partnership's progress. Extensive and well-established collaborative relationships and networking are needed for a program of this scale to measure and achieve shared outcomes and systems reforms.
- **Considerable staff and financial resources are needed to implement cross-systems information sharing and performance monitoring.** Cross-systems information and data sharing involving multiple agencies takes considerable time and resources. Both adequate staff time and funding are needed to develop and sustain a data collection and reporting infrastructure that can support comprehensive, high quality program evaluation and ongoing performance monitoring. In addition, successful cross-systems performance monitoring and evaluation hinges on having an evaluation team sufficient in both number and experience.
- **Program and evaluation staff must establish a close partnership and effective communication.** Program and evaluation staff must have a close, mutually respectful working relationship and open, two-way communication. Evaluation and program staff need to be integrated to ensure evaluation activities reflect a thorough understanding of the project's day-to-day practices, and evaluation results are translated into continued program improvements. An onsite evaluation team can help improve communication and coordination and strengthen overall data collection and analysis. Evaluators need to be proactive, timely, responsive, and actively engaged in the larger project and partnership. They need to have a thorough understanding of all program components and the needs of staff, partners, and the families served.
- **Process and outcomes evaluation data need to be communicated to partners and key stakeholders on a regular basis.** Sharing data for ongoing program management and continuous quality improvement positively impacted collaboration between partners. Not only did project staff and key partners communicate case-specific information for treatment planning purposes. They used their outcome and process evaluation data to strengthen overall program development and the specific services for families. They used it to guide sustainability planning. They also used data to develop new policies and procedures, or modify existing ones, for how the RPG program or larger service systems operate. The lengthy duration of many grantees' program models may require two or more years to

document longer-term outcomes and assess the project's broader success. Still, projects such as the regional partnerships need to identify, disseminate, and use interim process and outcomes evaluation findings for continued program development.

- **Data collection roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined and agreed upon for both individual staff and partner agencies.** The regional partnerships collected and linked data from multiple providers and systems. When dealing with such complex cross-systems data efforts, all partners need to be clear on their individual and larger agency data collection responsibilities. Lack of shared accountability and consistent, systematic guidelines can affect data quality and ultimately, the ability to use data for program improvements and sustainability. Formal data-sharing agreements, particularly with state or county agencies needed to extract case-level data, should be established early on to facilitate data collection and reporting.
- **Ongoing training and monitoring are needed to ensure data quality and consistency.** Ongoing oversight is needed to ensure data quality and consistency. Project management needs to understand the evaluation design, conduct regular quality assurance and data checks, and communicate regularly with program and evaluation staff responsible for data collecting and reporting. The need for close and constant supervision of data collection processes intensified with frequent and continued program and evaluation staff changes. Data quality and consistency issues often were closely intertwined with turnover of both RPG evaluation and state agency staff.
- **A mixed-methods research design is needed to capture the regional partnerships' full impact on the families and communities served.** Grantees acknowledged the quantitative RPG Program performance measures were important to gauge their progress. Yet the partnerships emphasized qualitative process evaluation information that described the experiences of families and RPG partners as equally essential. Both quantitative and qualitative data were essential to capture the full breadth, depth, and scope of grantees' programs and cross-systems collaborative progress. Qualitative information provided further evidence of how grantees had increased capacity to serve families and served to reinforce the RPG mission and experience.
- **Program evaluation and performance monitoring in a real-world setting are inherently difficult.** Conducting research in an applied or real-world setting where families' complex and multiple needs require flexibility in service delivery is inherently difficult. As one grantee explained, the RPG program was not a "one-size fits all" intervention. The partnerships often struggled with how to balance the tension between implementing a rigorous program evaluation design and delivering direct services to families. It is important the evaluator is involved early in the grant application and program development process to ensure alignment of the service delivery approach and evaluation design.

For More Information about the RPG Program

The RPG Program Briefs provide summary snapshots of selected aspects of the RPG Program. For more extensive information, please refer to the Reports to Congress (which are mandated by the authorizing legislation). The Reports are available at <http://www.cffutures.org/projects/regional-partnership-grants>.